

July 6, 2008

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 9 (Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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“A Declaration Worth Signing”

Here we are on the July 4th weekend during which we celebrate the signing of our nation's Declaration of Independence. Given the holiday opportunity to travel we can state that our presence here categorically marks us as among those select few who will be able to claim perfect attendance this year at All Saints'.

So, how weary are you today? I am not just talking about physically weary from whatever holiday activities you had, but also all the cares and concerns of our daily lives, the burdens of living in this day and age. Consider those among us who are under the weight of two jobs just to make ends meet. Or perhaps at your house there is reason to worry about the Dow Jones Averages or simply the burden of re-filling that gas tank. Could there be someone here with the stress of a second mortgage or pondering the wisdom of that move to the more affordable suburbs and its empty tank consequences? How about the diagnosis you await from that recent medical testing of yourself or a loved one? Consider the state of your key relationships; care for your parents; yielding to your children; maintenance of your partnership. The simple tyranny of the urgent: the physical workout of carrying in all that junk mail or even just the one finger it takes to delete all that spam. Wearying, isn't it?

Or what burdens are you carrying? Holiday travels, family expectations encountered or avoided, potential foreclosure, the down-sizing at Starbuck's, the instability of Pakistan or Zimbabwe looming over so many of us. Are you among those within the burden of the 430,000 jobs lost in our economy during the first six months of this year or one of the 4,300 American families mourning the death of your loved one in our service in Iraq or Afghanistan? Just the other day I overheard a conversation on a MARTA bus in which friends were noting that the Supreme Court decision on possession of handguns came on the same day that reductions in our local ambulance service were announced. Any connections to come between those two developments?

There is simply plenty going on that is wearying or burdensome. And what do you do with it?

Is there a plan for a holiday for your household, a vacation, even a day off? Are your normal household plans to get away affected by the cost per gallon?

Do you feel the need to find that balance that marks a healthy life, that balance of the intellectual, the clarity of thinking, the emotional, the appropriate feelings, and the physical, simply being within the proper range of every clinical measurement?

It is no simple thing to face the stress and anxiety of the lives given us to live. What are the best coping mechanisms?

And then there was this one day when Jesus, after he had been instructing his disciples, Matthew tells, went on “to teach and proclaim his message in their cities”, northern Galilee. Among other things he enunciates a series of “Woes”; “Woe to you, Chorazin!” “Woe to you Bethsaida!” He is trying to get their attention in what strikes him as the woeful state of their life. In that amazing way of his of turning things upside down he says: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” (Mt. 11: 25)

And then he, Jesus, speaks directly to those in difficult straits: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Mt. 11:28-30)

Have you ever actually lifted an ox yoke? A standard one must be at least five or six feet long and made of lumber roughly the size of a railroad tie. Imagine just lifting one up to say nothing of putting it across your shoulders so you could pull a cart. In this image Jesus tells his followers to take his yoke upon themselves. Thanks, all the same, kind sir, but didn't this conversation begin with you noting that we were already weary and heavy burdened?

But hear some more of what he says to his followers: “Take my yoke...and learn from me.” In fact the most efficient way to teach an animal to plow is to harness them to one who already knows how. Whether in a more gentle horse collar or the more primitive ox yoke the reality is that the ignorant beginner is yoked to one with whom to share the weight at the very least. And it doesn't take much more to realize that a yoke feels even better if we go in the same direction as the senior partner, to go in the direction being led.

All this reminds me of one of the most functional definitions of the Christian life I have ever heard. These followers of Jesus, indeed any of us who ourselves would desire to be followers, are called ‘disciples;’ in some sense the ones who have come into the ‘discipline.’ And the best definition of a disciple for me is that it is “***the one who learns to live the life his or her teacher lives.***” It is not the one who believes what the teacher believes. Nor is it the one who understands what the teacher understands. It is not even the one who says all the right things the teacher says. Or dresses the way the teacher dresses, or drives what the teacher drives, or sends his kids to the same school the teacher does. No, it is to live the life the teacher lives.

In the weariness and burdens of our lives this is the yoke offered to us. Where do we find it? Notice the direction Jesus states. It is not, “Ask me pretty and I'll come rescue you.” It is not, “Talk me into it.” It is not, “Double your pledge and I'll be right there.” It is not “Get me to show up in the situations of your life.” It is not, “Get me to come to you.” It is “Come to *me.*”

From where is Jesus summoning us? From where can we see him beckoning, inviting? For sure, there are any number of cataclysmic situations around the globe but I am always reminded of one of those powerful moments from what I think may be one of the clearest examples of sanctity in our time, the life of Mother Teresa. Early in the times she was becoming known outside Calcutta there was a reporter who went to check out her life and work and who spent a full day with her both at prayer with her sisterhood and then out in the streets as she gathered up a dying leper and brought him into her hospice. There she lovingly, on her hands and knees gave him a cup of water and bathed him gently all over his oozing and deformed body, comforting him for over an hour. Finally, needing to move on to another, Mother Teresa leaned over and gently kissed this dying man right on the puss and decay of his leprous lips. Amazed, the reporter did not know what to say and it was not until that evening that he could ask her why. How in the world could she do such a thing, he asked?

“But don’t you see,” came Teresa’s reply, “it is just Jesus in one of his cleverest disguises?”

That annoying colleague, that noisy neighbor, that difficult child, that drifty parent, that non-supportive sibling, that distancing partner—are not those clever disguises?

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Where is the loving Jesus ready to work? Where is it we can live the life our teacher lives? Where can we move from dependence to independence so that we may freely choose the inter-dependence of love?

This is not an additional burden but a powerful renewal of perspective. To look up and see, to discern direction and move forward in the power of the Spirit. To hear the Lord Christ speak even to you and me: “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Not ours to do alone; not ours to leave alone.

Now that’s a Declaration worth signing.